

Selective Tie Dissolution and Political Polarization among Pakistani Youth

Tayyeb Ramazan¹, Muhammad Shabbir Sarwar²

¹ PhD Scholar, University of the Punjab. Email: tayyeb.kamboh@gmail.com

² Associate Professor, Institute of Communication Studies, University of the Punjab.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63163/jpehss.v3i4.983>

Abstract

Social media has accelerated the prevalence of unfriending and selective exposure making it a matter of major concern when it comes to political polarization in modern democracies. This paper focuses on the association between political polarization and unfriending behavior on social media and the moderating effect of education in this association is considered. Based on the results of the surveys with adult social media users, the concept of political polarization is represented as a cohesive category that includes issue-based and ideological polarization. Based on the reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and the hierarchical regression modeling, the results show that political polarization is a significant and positive predictor of the unfriending behavior meaning that people with more polarized political views have higher chances of removing or avoiding politically dissimilar other people online. Moreover, moderation analysis shows that the influence of education on this relationship is important, whereby, the impact of political polarization of unfriending is less significant in those who possess higher education. These findings indicate that education can be a mediating force as it can promote tolerance towards political disagreement and exposure to different opinions. The research also adds to the developing body of literature about the topic of digital political behavior by incorporating various aspects of polarization into one explanatory model and by emphasizing the protective quality of education to restrain socially disintegrating online activities. Policymakers, educators, and platform designers are discussed in the context of practical implications pertaining to curbing polarization-induced social fragmentation in online platforms.

Keywords: Issue-based political polarization, Ideology base political polarization, Unfriending, Social Identity Theory, Education

Introduction

Modern democracies have become increasingly polarized in politics. The body of perception, characterized by growing ideological stability, increasing ideological aggression between political camps, and reduced readiness to cooperate across political differences, accumulates (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). These tendencies have brought up issues on the stability of the democracies, the social fabric and the capacity of citizens to discuss political differences across the political lines. Political polarization, which involves the actions of making political attitudes and identities of citizens more polarized because of an ideology or partisanship, is one of the key concerns of modern democracies. The growth of ideological regularity (Iyengar et al., 2012) and the growth of problem-based polarization, i.e. the growth of divergence of policy preferences and positions on issues between partisan parties, has been a well-known problem among scholars (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

Polarization undermines the deliberative values inherent in democracy (Habermas, 1996) by reducing the desire of citizens to talk past their differences in ideology and by forming echo chambers of existing ideologies. The result is social-trust decline, weakening of intergroup cooperation and vulnerability to misinformation, which are threats to democratic stability and collective problem-solving. Political attitudes are not in a vacuum; they are highly entrenched in the social contexts that influence the way people think, feel and talk about politics. The political worldviews are formed and socially strengthened in interpersonal environments, friends, family, coworkers and online contacts. In such relational environments, McPherson et al. (2001) opine that the principle of homophily prevails, i.e. people will affiliate themselves with others who share matching beliefs, values and identities. This natural sorting creates psychologically comfortable and politically bound networks and, at the same time, limits the exposure to different views.

Deliberate thoughts of democracy have long placed a very high value on the cross-cutting discussion, contacts among those holding divergent opinions. Mutz (2002) concludes that exposure to cross-cutting opinions has a moderate effect on ideological extremity, has a positive effect on political tolerance, and enhances a perception of the opposing point of view. These relations play a very important role in ensuring pluralism and reducing polarization in terms of ideology and issues. They improve intellectualism and take sides, so citizens can appreciate the legitimacy of political conflict. Contemporary social life, on the contrary, has become increasingly marked by the abandonment of politically discordant relations. The phenomenon, which is called selective tie dissolution, is the process of weakening or breaking social ties with the people who have divergent political views. It is best manifested on the internet in the form of politically instigated unfriending, blocking or muting in social networking platforms (Rainie & Smith, 2012). This disconnection can be psychologically a survival mechanism as people can evade unease, anger, or nervousness that could occur during political interactions. However, sociologically and democratically, the partial breakdown of ties has far-reaching consequences in a group. Although the bulk of the polarization research was devoted to elite-level polarization and media polarization, recent studies emphasize the importance of micro-level network mechanisms in perpetuating polarization. Indicatively, Bail et al. (2018) have discovered that exposure to partisans on opposing sides on Twitter does not result in moderation but in strengthening the attitude, as people interpret dissonance information defensively. On the same note, Lelkes (2021) also disclose that social networks are becoming partisan self-selected, where online and offline segregation is reinforcing ideological stiffness.

The selective tie dissolution is, therefore, a behavioral association between psychological dispositions (e.g., conflict avoidance, identity protection) and structural consequences (e.g., polarization of networks). This phenomenon demands an interdisciplinary approach that combines network analysis, political psychology and communication theory. The study of the current paper is that polarization not only results in selective tie dissolution but is also a process that promotes and exacerbates it. By cutting off relationships with people who hold politically unlike views, individuals are not evading conflict; they are merely recreating the conditions under which political attitudes are constituted and solidified. By eradicating cross-cutting relations, exposure to divergent opinions is reduced and leads to participation in ideologically parallel networks. In this process, networks become increasingly ideologically homogeneous, altering the informational and normative context of political participation. There are some reinforcing effects to these network changes. To begin with, ideologically homogenous networks reinforce group norms, and the shared political identities become more salient and lessen the challenges to mainstream accounts. Second, perceived consensus is augmented as people constantly encounter like-minded opinions, which makes them think that their stances are more popular and well-grounded than they are (Sunstein, 2001). Third, the absence of contact with political out-groups also helps to further increase the strength of issue-related rigidity and ideological mistrust against the opposing opinion (Boutyline

& Willer, 2017). These dynamics continue to exist even in the presence of no elite cues or partisan media.

The research on unfriending and political polarization in the dynamics of social media has received a new set of relevance because of the significant impact of online platforms on political discussions and social bonds (Sasahara et al., 2021). Research findings have indicated that echo chambers and filter bubbles have developed, with users being mainly exposed to ideologically and issue-based content that strengthens ideological and issue-focused divides (Sasahara et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020). High-tech algorithms and user behavior have been further exacerbating this fragmentation, with empirical evidence of increased polarization and network segregation on various platforms (Campbell et al., 2019). The present review analyzes the impact of unfriending on ideological and issue-based polarization through blocking, unfollowing, and disconnecting with politically incompatible people (Kaiser et al., 2022). Although studies on selective avoidance and network filtering have grown, little is known about the psychological, relational, and algorithmic processes behind them (Neubaum et al., 2021). It is debated among scholars that unfriending merely causes further ideological conformity or is a boundary-management tool in politically overloaded areas (Floyd et al., 2019). This area of knowledge gap is critical regarding devising strategies that will minimize polarization and promote democratic deliberation (Robertson et al., 2019). Political polarization is also being perceived as a multidimensional concept that involves ideological polarization and issue-based polarization. Ideological polarization is the broadening of the gap between the belief systems and general value frameworks, whereas issue-based polarization is the factor that describes the growing radicalness and adherence of the individual positions on a concrete political issue, like taxation, immigration, or climate change (Iyengar et al., 2012). The dimensions, though interrelated, possess different working mechanisms and can advance at different rates.

In recent studies, the changes in social networks have been linked especially with ideological polarization, where the self-sorting process by individuals forms a socially homogeneous space that strengthens the identities and values of people. As an example, Iyengar et al. (2012) indicate that even in a relatively stable policy position, partisan cleavage does not disappear, implying that polarization sustenance is not only in differences of views on issues but also in identity-based rewarding (Mason, 2018). Unfriending turns the political difference into social disengagement, which further increases the ideological inflexibility and issue-based division. Withdrawal of counter-attitudinal contacts is restrictive to exposure to alternative frames and undermines deliberative processes that promote compromise. The homogeneous networks, therefore, create collective understandings of political issues and the sense of moral and intellectual confidence of the ideological standpoints (Sunstein, 2001). In the long run, this informational insulation leads to increased conformity between the ideological perspectives of people and their respective positions on certain issues, which creates self-rewarding aspects of polarization. Thus, unfriending may be considered a behavioral process that causes ideological and issue-based polarization at the same time. It polarizes not just opinion but also social structures supporting it by reducing the diversity of social communication and strengthening similar ways of seeing the world.

Education has a subtle place in the issue of political polarization. According to classical democratic theory, higher education leads to political tolerance, critical thinking, and the willingness to hear points of view which are opposed. Nevertheless, modern empirical studies make this perspective more complicated by indicating that in politically charged situations, higher education may become a source of ideological polarization as well (Kahan et al., 2017). Educated people have more political knowledge and communicative abilities, yet they can use the abilities to explain existing partisan standings instead of allowing them to enter an open deliberation. Empirical literature has found that the connection between polarization and political participation differs

according to the level of education. The more educated people are, the more likely they are to talk about politics online and arrange their networks in a more ideologically consistent manner (Guess et al., 2018). Due to this, education can support the polarizing influence of unfriending by giving one cognitive and moral legitimization to stop engaging in opposing opinions. In this regard, education is not a buffer to polarization but is instead a contextual amplifier that boosts the capability of defending ideologically consistent networks behind the manifestation of rational discussion.

It is important to understand the difference between ideological and issue-based polarization when explaining how unfriending leads to further social fragmentation. Ideological polarization embodies the difference in abstract belief systems and value orientations, whereas issue-based polarization encompasses an augmenting agreement and extremity as regards tangible political matters. These two types of polarization are dynamic, and they influence both the cognitive and behavioral results. Unfriending disrupts social networks, with both dimensions experiencing the long-term implications. Not only are the politically dissimilar ties narrowed out, but by doing so, individuals limit their exposure to alternative views, creating social environments that confirm their already held beliefs. In the long run, this process leads to the development of a sense of ideological closure, in which people perceive information mainly through their powerful political schema, and constricts their readiness to compromise on certain policy matters. As a result, ideological polarization is the mental source of extremity on issues. Homogenous networks strengthen ideological stability and normative certainty by affirmation. In these domains, people are less challenged in their assumptions and create the illusion of agreement and intellectual homogenization. This social insulation does not just result in augmentation of ideological ardour, but it is also translated into polarization on issues, as the members of the same group will unite on the same policy positions. This feedback process establishes a condition in which ideological and issue-based polarizing development co-evolves with each other, and the process of selective exposure and social confirmation. This paper highlights that polarization is a consequence of network restructuring more than emotional antagonism by defining both dimensions as the result of network restructuring as opposed to emotional hostility.

This research is based on the Social Identity Theory (SIT) to elaborate the role of unfriending politically unlike people in ideological and issue polarization. SIT postulates that people gain self-esteem and meaning through their group affiliations and work towards continuing to positively differentiate between in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Partisan identities have become salient social identities in the current times defining not only attitudes towards politics, but also interpersonal behaviors in digital space. Unfriending is a symbolic behavior of boundary maintenance in this theoretical premise. Exposure to politically unlike people can be perceived as a threat to in-group coherence as the identity of politics becomes central to oneself concept. In counteracting this people respond by undertaking measures like unfriending to reassert in-group distinctiveness and ideological alignment. Through this process, there is a renewal of cognitive and normative fit within the network and the enhancement of group-based identity coherence.

Notably, unfriending is not merely a manifestation of the status quo polarization but it actively recreates the ideological frontiers in social space. By filtering opposing opinions in an orderly way, people turn the digital space into the continuation of the political self. Consequently, polarization is incorporated in the social structure, which goes beyond opinion divisions to become a way of identity organization. SIT also explains how unfriending promotes polarizing ideologies by enhancing in-group unity and reducing the ability to get to know those of another group. The more homogenous the networks that people belong to, the more the affirmation of ideological conviction is enhanced. The lack of cross-cutting interaction does not allow individuals to humanize or contextualize conflicting views depending on the ideological frames and positions taken on an

issue. In the long run, this seclusion creates echo chambers where people share an ideological homogeneity and policy agreement among themselves and the increasing gap between them. Also, Social Identity Theory assumes a vicious cycle of identity, whereby the act of unfriending enhances political polarization. By making fewer friends with politically incompatible people, individuals minimize exposure to out-group views and maximize the importance of in-group identifications. This discriminative form of reorganizing social relationships enhances social identification as people are surrounded by like-minded people who reinforce common beliefs, norms, and political discourses (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the process, this process increases emotional attachment to the in-group and symbolic boundaries between them. The more group identification is achieved, the more the people become aware of the ideological issues, where dissenting opinion is not viewed as a different opinion but rather a threat to the group identity (Huddy, 2001). Even the slightest disagreement may be seen as symbolic disloyalty, which leads to additional actions of unfriending or social isolation. Writing in this way, however, unfriending is not only reactive to explicit conflict but also proactive since people anticipate breaking the bond before it becomes an identity threat or a cognitive burden to them (Mutz, 2006).

From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, unfriending therefore stands out as a normal practice of identity in which individuals operate their political identities in their daily lives. It also functions to defend identities and legitimize them with in-group support, as well as indicate that they belong to politically significant groups (Abrams and Hogg, 2006). This view allows us to see that polarization in digital space is not just a consequence of the exposure to information or the division of opinions regarding policy-specific matters, but rather a profound part of the social identity management processes, where the very relationships between individuals become a tool to preserve the ideological space and continue the political fragmentation. The theoretical framework of this study places social media unfriending as the most critical independent variable that determines political polarization, which is the dependent variable. The model is based on Social Identity Theory, which views polarization in politics as a result of identity-based social processes instead of an ideological disagreement.

H1: Unfriending on social media due to political reasons is positively related to political polarization.

Scholarly interest in the connection between politically motivated unfriending on social media and political polarization has been growing due to the increasing role of digital media in political interaction. Defined as the act of deleting or shunning social connections involving political contention, unfriending is an active mode of network management that redefines the information and social space of individuals. Current literature indicates that such practices cause polarization through a decrease in cross-cutting exposure, increased social identity boundaries, and attitudinal extremity. The initial study of political communication stressed the democratic worth of exposure to varying opinions and held that communication with politically unlike individuals could moderate attitudes and eliminate extremism (Mutz, 2006). Nevertheless, the features of social media enable users to circumvent such exposure through the selective disconnection between objectionable people. Unfriending is, therefore, not comparable to passive avoidance since it involves a conscious behavior of being socially excluded that is used to indicate the rejection of out-group views and strengthening of ideological barriers.

Considering a social identity perspective, polarization is especially affected by unfriending. According to Social Identity Theory, people generate self-esteem and meaning through group memberships, and they are encouraged to sustain positive differences between in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Party affiliation and ideological orientation are brought into the limelight as social identity in the politically charged environment. It has been established that in the presence of political identities, people are more likely to have affective reactions towards

members of in-groups and out-groups, such as distrust, hostility, and social distance (Huddy et al., 2015). Unfriending political motives can thus be assumed as an identity-protective practice that seeks to promote in-group cohesion, as well as reduce identity threat. Evidence on the relation between unfriending and other related practices to increased polarization is proven by empirical studies. Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) reveal that it is clear that the polarization in modern-day politics is more affective attachments to partisan identities and not pure disagreement on ideology. This emotional polarization is social, like the avoidance of communication with political out-groups, which in digital situations operationalizes directly with the process of unfriending. In cutting off communication with politically different people, people intensify affective differences and make social segregation across the partisan lines as normal.

The studies of social media networks also suggest that unfriending leads to the homogeneity of ideologies and the creation of echo chambers. Bakshy et al. (2015) conclude that although social media sites subject users to some cross-cutting content, individual preferences such as who to follow or unfriend are important determinants of exposure to divergent opinions. The more actively users process dissident voices out of their feeds, the more they are likely to receive politically compatible information, and this could amplify the attitudes they already have and make them even more polarized (Sunstein, 2018). There is also longitudinal and experimental evidence indicating that network homogeneity increases polarization in politics. Bail et al. (2018) indicate that exposure to antithetical political content on social media can occasionally make the polarization more intense, especially among strong partisans. Unfriending, in this case, can be a form of coping that enables people to engage in an ideologically protective withdrawal, further polarizing attitudes. In the long term, such withdrawal minimizes the prospects of deliberation and understanding, which leads to long-term polarization. Notably, unfriending does not solely work via the informational mechanisms; it also works via social signaling. When politically dissimilar others are driven out, a public display of loyalty to a political group is conveyed and normative expectations are strengthened within the network of an individual (Koudenburg et al., 2013). It is this signalling that enhances conformity to an in-group and deters deviation of ideologies, further intensifying polarization at the individual, as well as group, level. Altogether, the literature indicates that politically motivated unfriending has a positive relation with political polarization.

H2: Unfriending has both positive relationships with ideological polarization and issue-based polarization.

Political polarization has been coming to be seen as a multi dimension phenomenon that involves ideological and policy preference convergence and divergence. Whereas ideological polarization is used as the measure of the degree to which individuals assume consistent and drastic ideological or partisan identification, issue-based polarization defines disagreements in particular areas of policy, including economic management, civil liberties, defence and social welfare. This is especially significant in online spaces, where social practices such as the process of unfriending can also determine abstract ideological tendencies and real positions on issues. The available literature indicates that politically influenced unfriending is correlated with both polarization dimensions in a positive way. In terms of social identity, the act of being unfriended supports the polarization of ideology by developing partisan and ideological identities. According to Social Identity Theory, individuals perceive themselves and others into social groups and derive self-esteem out of these group memberships and aspire to a positive distinctiveness to their in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Ideological and partisan affiliations are social identities that are salient in modern politics, which are often accompanied by high levels of emotional attachment (Huddy, 2001). Unfriending politically dissimilar people symbolically and materially separates them out-groups, therefore, solidifying ideological self-conceptions and amplifying affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012).

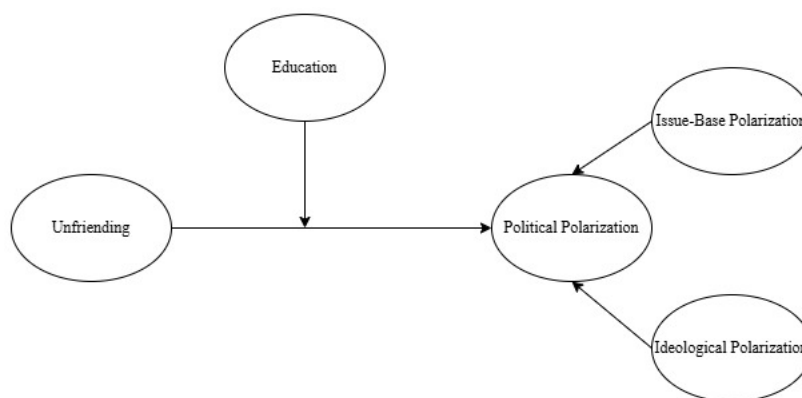
The connection between social exclusion and ideological extremity can be supported by empirical research. Research indicates that in ideologically homogeneous networks, individuals who are embedded tend to take on ideologically consistent and extreme standings, as time goes by (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008). The affordances of social media help to achieve this homogeneity because the tools allow users to filter their network by unfriending and unfollowing others and minimizing exposure to moderating factors (Bakshy et al., 2015). Subsequently, unfriending leads to polarization of ideologies due to the reinforcement of ideological coherence and partisan identification. Unfriending is also a source of issue-based polarization, which determines the way the individuals assess and prioritize certain policy issues. It has also been revealed that exposure to varied opinions creates ambivalence and cross-pressured attitude towards political matters compared to networks, which are homogeneous, leading to the creation of attitude consistency and extremism (Mutz, 2006). Removing voices of dissent in their networks, individuals are more likely to experience such issue frames and policy arguments which are consistent with their current preferences, increasing the issue positions. The information flow of social networks has been studied and shown to support the polarization of issues based on selective exposure by strengthening the dominant stories of an ideological group (Sunstein, 2018). Under these conditions, the policy reviews are further biased and polarized to generate extreme disparities in the evaluation of the government's performance in the domain of issues (Lelkes, 2016). The act of unfriending causes this process to happen faster by eliciting counter-attitudinal views in an active way that would otherwise complicate or moderate judgment of issues.

Besides, unfriending is a social cue that normalizes polarized issue standpoints in in-groups. Unfriending the people who post dissenting opinions about certain policies, people strengthen the group norms of the right issue position and demotivate the internal opposition (Koudenburg et al., 2013). Such dynamism leads to the congruency of issue preferences and ideological identities and their further attenuation as well as enhancement of each other. Collectively, the literature shows that being unfriended is positively related to ideological polarization and issue-based polarization. Network homogeneity, mechanisms of identity reinforcement, and selective exposure make unfriending tighten ideological attachment and, at the same time, intensify polarization on issues of policy. These mechanisms highlight how ordinary social media practices can form not just abstract political identities, but also concrete policy preferences, which offer a sound empirical and theoretical basis to the hypothesis that unfriending is one of the contributors to various aspects of political polarization.

H3: Education moderates the relationship between the variable of unfriending and political polarization. Unfriending due to political reasons has been found to lead to political polarization, the strength and direction of this relationship may not be consistent among all individuals. Previous studies propose that education is an essential moderating factor in that it influences political thinking, tolerance to dissent, and the ability to process conflicting information. Therefore, the polarizing influence of unfriending can depend on the level of education of people. Congenitally and informationally, education is usually equated with greater political knowledge, critical thinking, and exposure to other points of view (Delli & Keeter, 1996). The more educated a person is, the more they have the capacity to interpret complicated political content and respond to counter-attitudinal argumentation without quickly developing defensive responses. The classical views of deliberation, therefore, propose that education can counteract the polarizing impact of unfriending because educated people can be less dependent on network homogeneity to preserve ideological consistency (Mutz, 2006).

This assumption is, however, complicated by modern studies, which show that education may also result in polarization in specific circumstances. Research indicates that politically complex and highly educated people tend to have more ideological consistency and have a stronger attachment

to partisan labelling (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008). Instead of increasing transparency, education can increase the power of individuals to selectively process information in a manner that supports the previously held beliefs, which is referred to as motivated reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006). In this respect, unfriending can be turned into a tactic that educated people can employ to include ideologically aligned networks, with the help of which polarization is increased. Social Identity Theory also explains the reason why unfriending can be polarized by education. Political identities are not just emotional affinities but are cognitively organized systems of beliefs which are more evidently presented among the educated people (Huddy, 2001). The more people are engaged, and their identity becomes more salient, unfriending can be more probable to serve as an identity-protective response among the educated, reaffirming ideological divisions and enhancing affective polarization. On the other hand, unfriending might indicate episodic conflict and/or disengagement but not long-term identity-based polarization among the less educated. The moderating effect of education in the polarization dynamics has been supported empirically. According to Fiorina and Abrams (2008), polarization is observed to be greatest between politically sensitive and educated groups of citizens, with the less educated frequently being more ambivalent or cross-pressured. In like manner, Lelkes (2016) concludes that education has an interaction with political interest to affect the affective polarization and that educational attainment conditions the way in which political identities are activated and sustained. On the internet, this means that the effects of unfriending can vary based on the education and political capacity of people.



Research Methodology

The study uses a quantitative and cross-sectional survey research design to test the hypothesis regarding the association between politically motivated unfriending on social media and political polarization and the moderating role of education. The quantitative method is suitable as the aim of the study is to both test the theoretically developed hypotheses and estimate the strength of the association between the key variables through statistical means. The cross-sectional design will allow for considering individual-level political attitudes and social media behaviors at a single point in time. A total sample of 1,292 respondents was used to obtain data, and this is sufficient to give good statistical power to the multivariate analysis, including moderation testing. The study made use of a non-probability sampling technique, which is a purposive sampling method because of the lack of a complete sampling frame of politically active social media users. Such a methodology is common in digital political behaviour studies and appropriate to reach politically active people through a variety of social media.

A self-administered online questionnaire, which was intended to be disseminated via social media and messaging programs was used to gather data. The respondents were allowed to participate

voluntarily, and they were told about the academic rationale of the study before filling in the survey. Astute consent was granted via electronics, and no personally recognizable data was gathered to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. The web-based data collection was able to cover more geographical areas and promote honesty when answering politically sensitive questions. Political unfriending is the independent variable that is conceptualized as the un- or avoidance of social connections due to political difference. It was assessed with the help of five Likert-type items that reflected the propensity of the respondents to unfriend, unfollow, or disengage with people of a different political opinion. The answers were measured on the five-point Likert scale. The measures of politically motivated unfriending applied in the current study are based on and conceptually grounded in the previous studies focusing on social media unfriending, selective avoidance and political disagreement. In particular, the construction is based on research by John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015), who formulate unfriending as intentional disconnection or hiding of social relationships due to a political difference, over-expressed politics, and confrontational interaction in the virtual sphere.

Political polarization is considered a multidimensional dependent variable which includes ideological polarization and issue-based polarization. The polarization of ideologies was quantified by evaluating the intensity of ideological or partisan attachment of respondents as well as their affective separation from the opposite political entities. Issue-based polarization was measured by the ratings of the respondents on the political actors and governments on important policy areas such as freedom of speech, economic performance, health, and defence. Increased variation of such evaluations was also viewed as more issue-based polarization. The concept of political polarization in the current study is discussed as a concept that has two dimensions: issue-based polarization, and ideological polarization. The difference signals an existing body of literature that polarization takes the forms of divergent ratings of policy performance as well as effective or identity-based ratings of political leaders (Lelkes, 2016). Based on this, the survey items were derived into two dimensions of analysis that are analytically different but related.

Issue-based polarization was quantified by the assessment of the respondents on the PDM and PTI governments in the substantive policy areas such as education, health, defence, economic conditions, employment insecurity, foreign relations, corruption and government spending. Respondents gave a rating on each government individually on the same issues on a ten-point scale. The operation of issue-based polarization was coded on the basis of the extent of the differences in the judgments that the respondents held on the two governments on these policy areas with greater evaluative differences recording higher issue-based polarization. This style of approach captures polarization as an argument over tangible result of policy and performance in governance. The ideological polarization was evaluated based on the judgments offered by the respondents regarding political leadership identified with each political camp. The respondents were used to rate PTI leadership (Imran Khan) and PDM leadership (Nawaz Sharif, Shahbaz Sharif, and Asif Zardari) in terms of a set of leadership and character traits, such as inspirational quality, vision, self-sacrifice, autonomy, charisma, and ability to communicate and perceived corruption lack. These values reflect affective and identity-related values of judgments instead of the performance of the policy and thus are considered measures of ideological polarization. Ideological polarization was measured by the difference in respondent ratings about political leaders holding opposite ideologies in these characteristics, and this shows how far and to what degree the political identities influence the perceptions of the leader.

Data Analysis

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	587	45.4
	Male	685	53.0
	Other	20	1.5
Age (years)	Mean (SD)	30.39 (8.62)	—
	Min–Max	18–60	—
Education	Middle or below	151	11.7
	Matric	294	22.8
	Intermediate	500	38.7
	Graduation	280	21.7
	Higher education	67	5.2
Marital Status	Single	563	43.6
	Married	596	46.1
	Divorced / Separated	133	10.3
Residential Location	Rural	305	23.6
	Semi-rural / Semi-urban	213	16.5
	Urban	774	59.9
Monthly Income (PKR)	Below 50,000	291	22.5
	Below 100,000	383	29.6
	Below 150,000	366	28.3
	Below 200,000	169	13.1
	Above 200,000	83	6.4

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic features of the respondents of the study. The sample is relatively even with male respondents taking slightly over fifty percent (53.0) of the sample with female respondents taking slightly less (45.4) and other gender identities describing a small percentage (1.5). The distribution indicates there is adequate gender representation but the number of male respondents is marginally higher. The respondents have a mean age of 30.39 years (SD =

8.62), and the age of the respondents has been distributed between 18 to 60 years, so one can conclude that the sample is mainly represented by young to early middle-aged adults. This age sample is especially applicable in the case of research on social media use and political participation since a greater number of these age groups tend to be online. The sample is quite well-educated in terms of education. Quite a significant percentage of respondents possess intermediate education (38.7%), then there are graduation degree holders (21.7%). The education is also represented by respondents with matric level education (22.8%), but the group with middle and low education is quite large (11.7%). Per cent of the sample that has higher education qualifications is very minimal (5.2%), and it is possible that sample is educated, but advanced academic attainment is not very prevalent. The marital status data shows that there is almost equal representation of the single (43.6%) and married respondent (46.1) with representation of various life stages. Also, the percentage of those respondents who are divorced or separated is 10.3, and it is not negligible, which can potentially have certain consequences on the structure of social networks and the patterns of online interactions.

On the issue of where the respondent lives in a particular residential location, most of them are urban dwellers (59.9%), with the rural dwellers comprising 23.6%. The least important percentage is comprised of those residing in semi-rural or semi-urban regions (16.5%). Such urban dominance implies increased exposure to digital media space and possible increased interest in online political discussion. The level of monthly income is used to demonstrate that the sample consists predominantly of lower- to middle-income groups. Almost a third of the respondents have incomes below PKR 100,000 (29.6%), and 28.3% have incomes below PKR 150,000. Approximately 22.5 percent are below PKR 50,000. The upper income also has a low presence, only 6.4% of the population has incomes above PKR 200,000, which shows that not that many high-income people are represented.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Cronbach Alpha Value

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Items	CA
Issue-Based Political Polarization	1292	3.61	2.54	7	0.93
Ideology-Based Political Polarization	1292	3.05	2.38	8	0.95
Unfriending	1292	2.77	0.97	5	0.90
Education	1292	3.07	1.26	1.00	4.00

The descriptive analysis reveals that the respondents have moderate levels of political polarization. The level of issue-based political polarization ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 2.54$) is a little higher than that of ideology-based political polarization ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 2.38$), which implies that issues based political polarization is more pronounced than ideological polarization. The unfriending behavior mean ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 0.97$) indicates a moderate approach towards the act of unfriending or alienating politically dissimilar individuals on social media. The education variable shows a comparatively educated sample ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.26$) and the sample respondents are spread throughout the entire spectrum of categories of education. The reliability test shows that all scales of the measurements adopted in the study have a high internal consistency. The Ideological Political Polarization scale (7 items) has a high Cronbachs alpha (0.93), and the Issue-Based Political Polarization scale (8 items) coefficients are extremely strong (0.95). And so does the Unfriending scale, which is a 5-item measure and has an excellent internal consistency (0.90). The

alpha values are above the recommended value of 0.70, and this ensures that the instruments are valid and can be subjected to further statistical tests (Table 2).

The correlation analysis shows that there is a strong positive correlation between issue-based political polarization and ideology-based polarization ($r = .80$), and therefore individuals who are politically polarized on certain issues are also likely to be politically polarized broadly. The two types of political polarizations have moderate and positive relationships with unfriending behavior. Unfriending has a stronger correlation with issue-based polarization ($r = .59$) than with ideology-based polarization ($r = .42$), indicating that disagreement on specific issues of political concern can be more closely correlated with the decision to end social media communication than ideological differences. All major variables have weak and negligible relationships with education (r values differ between .01 and .04), pointing to the fact that education does not meaningfully relate to political polarization or unfriending behavior in this sample (Table 3).

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3
1. Issue-Based Political Polarization	1.00		
2. Ideology-Based Political Polarization	0.80	1.00	
3. Unfriending	0.59	0.42	1.00
4. Education	0.01	0.04	0.02

To examine the effect of unfriending on political polarization, simple linear regression analyses were conducted. The results indicate that unfriending significantly predicted issue-based political polarization, $F(1, 1290) = 679.20, p < .001$, explaining 34.5% of the variance in issue-based polarization ($R^2 = .35$). Unfriending was a strong positive predictor of issue-based political polarization ($\beta = 1.09, t = 16.63, p < .001$), suggesting that higher levels of unfriending behavior are associated with increased polarization on political issues.

A separate regression analysis showed that unfriending also significantly predicted ideological political polarization, $F(1, 1290) = 276.60, p < .001$, accounting for 17.7% of the variance in ideological polarization ($R^2 = .18$). The regression coefficient indicates a positive and statistically significant relationship between unfriending and ideological polarization ($\beta = 0.65, t = 16.63, p < .001$), though the magnitude of the effect was smaller compared to issue-based polarization. A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the effect of unfriending on overall political polarization. The results indicate that unfriending is a significant positive predictor of political polarization, $F(1, 1290) = 493.00, p < .001$, explaining approximately 27.7% of the variance in political polarization ($R^2 = .28$). The regression coefficient suggests that higher levels of unfriending behavior are associated with increased political polarization ($B = 1.22, t = 22.20, p < .001$).

Table 4: Regression Analysis

Hypothesis	Dependent Variable	Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	R^2
H1	Issue-Based Political Polarization	Unfriending	1.09	0.07	.59	16.63	< .001	.35
H2	Ideological Political Polarization	Unfriending	0.65	0.04	.42	16.63	< .001	.18
H3	Political Polarization (Combined)	Unfriending	1.22	0.06	.53	22.20	< .001	.28

A moderation analysis using PROCESS Model 1 was conducted to examine whether education moderates the relationship between unfriending and political polarization. The results indicate that unfriending is a significant positive predictor of political polarization ($B = 1.25, p < .001$). However, education does not have a significant main effect on political polarization ($p = .497$), nor does the interaction between unfriending and education reach statistical significance ($p = .502$). These findings suggest that the positive association between unfriending and political polarization remains consistent across different levels of education, providing no support for a moderating effect of education.

Table 5: Moderation Analysis

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Unfriending	1.25	0.06	.55	21.89	< .001
Education	0.03	0.04	.02	0.68	.497
Unfriending \times Education	0.03	0.05	.02	0.67	.502

Discussion

The current research explored the connection between unfriending on social media and political polarization, specifically, issue-based polarization and ideological polarization, and the interaction of the two. In line with the hypothesis, the results prove that unfriending is an important and positive predictor of political polarization. Those people who engage in unfriending more often than those that are politically dissimilar are found to be more polarized, which provides empirical evidence to the theories of selective exposure and social homophily in the digital context (Mutz, 2006; McPherson et al., 2001). The results also show that unfriending has more impacts on issue-based political polarization as compared to ideological polarization. This difference has a theoretical significance. Lacking a preference regarding the actual policy details and the outcomes of governance, issue-based polarization is the sign of disagreement, which is prominent in the common political dialogues in the social media.

By filtering out those who disagree with their opinion on-line, users are being exposed to homogenous opinions, which in turn supports their argument on certain political matters. This result is consistent with the previous studies that indicate that social media-based communication results in an increase in the polarization of issues due to the amplification of confirmatory information and the reduction of exposure to counter-attitudinal views (Sunstein, 2018; Bakshy et al., 2015). Whereas ideological polarization was also to a large part dependent on unfriending, the relatively weak effect indicates ideological orientations to be more persistent and entrenched than issue-specific attitudes. The issue positions can be more sensitive to the immediate social cues and online conversations than ideological beliefs are, which are usually formed under the influence of the long-term socialization processes. This confirms previous studies which suggest that the social media forces can be especially useful in terms of strengthening the short- to mid-term political orientations, as compared to reshaping core ideological identities (Stroud, 2010). In a bid to have a more comprehensive picture of political polarization, the research integrated issue-based polarization with ideological polarization to come up with one composite measure. The outcomes of the regression analysis based on this compound index also verified that the process of unfriending is a strong indicator of total political polarization. This observation confirms the opinion that unfriending is not simply the effect of polarization but also the process in which polarization is maintained and exacerbated in the context of online social networks (Garrett, 2009).

Through progressive marginalization of politically incomparable others, people minimize the chances of deliberation and cross-cutting exposure, thus adding to more polarized online publics. Quite contrary, education did not average the correlation between unfriending and political polarization. The main impact of education was not found to be statistically significant either, and the interaction between education and unfriending was not found to be statistically significant. This observation indicates that the polarizing effect of unfriending is similar in both levels of education. Although it has been expected that education allows people to be more tolerant and think critically when it comes to politics, the current outcomes have shown that better education does not always protect people against the polarizing nature of social media. This confirms the growing evidence that the affordances of digital platforms can dominate the individual-level features, including education, resulting in polarization even in users with a relatively high level of education (Prior, 2013; Guess et al., 2018).

The fact that education does not have a moderating effect is significant in its theoretical implications. It complicates the belief that education equally enhances openness to various political views on the Internet. Rather, it may imply that the environments of social media can promote selective behaviors of avoidance no matter the level of education of users. This phenomenon can be enhanced by algorithms, social identity processes, and affective polarization, which reduce the protective influence of education, which has traditionally played an important role in the research of political communication. On the whole, the research results offered by the current study can be added to the existing literature on digital polarization since the issue of unfriending as the paramount behavioral process between the use of social media and political polarization is identified. The research builds upon the previous literature by empirically separating issue-based and ideological polarization and proving that unfriending is associated with issue polarization especially. In addition, the insignificant role of education as a moderator supports the widespread nature of the polarization processes in the modern digital environments.

Limitations & Recommendation

This study has a number of limitations, even with the contribution it has made. To begin with, a cross-sectional design limits the ability to make a causal conclusion because the causal direction of the association between unfriending and political polarization cannot be conclusively determined. Second, self-reported data can give rise to biases of social desirability and recollection, which can affect the accuracy of the reported unfriending behavior and political attitudes. Third, the sample is mostly young and urbanized; this fact can be a constraint in generalizing the results to the older age groups, or the rural environment characterized by different social media usage patterns. Also, the research is issue-based and ideological polarization, and fails to capture other significant facets of polarization, like affective polarization or partisan identity. Lastly, education was also a moderator that was tested, but other factors included in the study, including political interest, media literacy, and platform-specific dynamics, were not investigated. Future studies ought to use longitudinal or experimental study designs to better determine the causes, use behavioral or platform-level data to minimize self-report bias, consider other dimensions of polarization, and investigate other possible moderators and contextual factors to give a more complete picture of how social media unfriending racializes politics.

References

- Abramowitz, A. I., & Saunders, K. L. (2008). Is polarization a myth? *The Journal of Politics*, 70(2), 542–555. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381608080493>
- Abrams, D., & Hogg, M. A. (2006). *Social identifications: A social psychology of intergroup relations and group processes*. Routledge.

- Bail, C. A., Argyle, L. P., Brown, T. W., Bumpus, J. P., Chen, H., Hunzaker, M. B. F., ... Volfovsky, A. (2018). Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *115*(37), 9216–9221. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804840115>
- Bakshy, E., Messing, S., & Adamic, L. A. (2015). Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook. *Science*, *348*(6239), 1130–1132. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaa1160>
- Barberá, P. (2020). Social media, echo chambers, and political polarization. In N. Persily & J. A. Tucker (Eds.), *Social media and democracy: The state of the field, prospects for reform* (pp. 34–55). Cambridge University Press.
- Boutyline, A., & Willer, R. (2017). The social structure of political echo chambers. *Sociological Science*, *4*, 398–423. <https://doi.org/10.15195/v4.a17>
- Campbell, J. E., Green, J. C., & Layman, G. C. (2019). The party faithful: Partisan images, candidate responses, and the stability of party identification. *Political Behavior*, *41*(4), 987–1011.
- Delli Carpini, M. X., & Keeter, S. (1996). *What Americans know about politics and why it matters*. Yale University Press.
- Fiorina, M. P., & Abrams, S. J. (2008). Political polarization in the American public. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *11*, 563–588. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.053106.153836>
- Floyd, J., Weeks, B. E., & Williams, A. E. (2019). Polarization and selective exposure. *Political Communication*, *36*(2), 261–280. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2018.1520695>
- Garrett, R. K. (2009). Echo chambers online? Politically motivated selective exposure among Internet news users. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *14*(2), 265–285.
- Guess, A. M., Nyhan, B., Lyons, B., & Reifler, J. (2018). Avoiding the echo chamber: Exposure to counterattitudinal news on Facebook. *Political Behavior*, *40*(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-017-9390-2>
- Guess, A., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2018). Selective exposure to misinformation. *European Research Council Working Paper*.
- Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. MIT Press.
- Huddy, L. (2001). From social to political identity: A critical examination of social identity theory. *Political Psychology*, *22*(1), 127–156. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00230>
- Huddy, L., Mason, L., & Aarøe, L. (2015). Expressive partisanship: Campaign involvement, political emotion, and partisan identity. *American Political Science Review*, *109*(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055414000604>
- Iyengar, S., & Westwood, S. J. (2015). Fear and loathing across party lines: New evidence on group polarization. *American Journal of Political Science*, *59*(3), 690–707. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12152>
- Iyengar, S., Sood, G., & Lelkes, Y. (2012). Affect, not ideology: A social identity perspective on polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *76*(3), 405–431. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfs038>
- John, N. A., & Gal, N. (2016). He's got his own song: Unfriending and impression management on Facebook. *Information, Communication & Society*, *19*(6), 756–770. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1083171>
- Kaiser, J., Keller, T. R., & Kleinen-von Königslöw, K. (2022). Incidental exposure to political information and polarization. *Journal of Communication*, *72*(2), 180–201. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqab053>
- Koudenburg, N., Postmes, T., & Gordijn, E. H. (2013). Conversational flow promotes solidarity. *PLoS ONE*, *8*(11), e78363. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0078363>

- Lelkes, Y. (2016). Mass polarization: Manifestations and measurements. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80(1), 392–410. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfw005>
- Lelkes, Y. (2021). Policy over party: Comparing the effects of candidate ideology and party affiliation. *American Political Science Review*, 115(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305542000081X>
- Levendusky, M. (2013). *How partisan media polarize America*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mason, L. (2018). *Uncivil agreement: How politics became our identity*. University of Chicago Press.
- McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., & Cook, J. M. (2001). Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 415–444. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.415>
- Mutz, D. C. (2002). The consequences of cross-cutting networks for political participation. *American Journal of Political Science*, 46(4), 838–855. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3088437>
- Mutz, D. C. (2006). *Hearing the other side: Deliberative versus participatory democracy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Prior, M. (2013). Media and political polarization. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 16, 101–127.
- Stroud, N. J. (2010). Polarization and partisan selective exposure. *Journal of Communication*, 60(3), 556–576.
- Rainie, L., & Smith, A. (2012). *Politics on social networking sites*. Pew Research Center.
- Robertson, R. E., Lazer, D., & Wilson, C. (2019). Auditing algorithmic personalization. *Journal of Communication*, 69(5), 499–522. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqz020>
- Sasahara, K., Chen, W., Peng, H., Ciampaglia, G. L., Flammini, A., & Menczer, F. (2019). Social influence and political polarization. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(23), 11364–11369. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1813163116>
- Sasahara, K., Chen, W., Peng, H., Flammini, A., & Menczer, F. (2021). Structural biases in information exposure. *Nature Communications*, 12, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-021-21430-5>
- Sunstein, C. R. (2018). *#Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press.
- Taber, C. S., & Lodge, M. (2006). Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs. *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(3), 755–769. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2006.00214.x>
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.
- Wang, Y., Zhou, Y., Zhan, J., & Li, Q. (2020). Algorithmic filtering and political polarization. *Information Processing & Management*, 57(6), 102343. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ipm.2020.102343>
- Zhu, Q. (2022). Social media avoidance and political polarization. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(10), 1451–1469. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1817199>
- Zhu, Q., & Skoric, M. M. (2021). Selective avoidance on social media. *New Media & Society*, 23(3), 543–562. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820901238>